

[More Pleasant on Pleasant Valley](http://transbayblog.com/2009/06/30/more-pleasant-on-pleasant-valley/)

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Most streets in North Oakland — lined as they are with trees, bungalows, and low-rise apartment buildings — have been built out on a comfortable and pleasant scale. But the shopping center located north and east of the intersection of Broadway and Pleasant Valley Avenue stands apart as, well, anything but pleasant. It is an uninspired 1960s autocentric strip mall, featuring a collection of low-slung buildings centered on a mighty surface parking lot. The shopping center has housed a large Longs Drugs; a smaller but still sizable Safeway; and a collection of smaller retail spaces. But some [changes are afoot](#) for this shopping center. The Longs will close, and Safeway will covet the larger space, even while it moves forward with plans to expand another of its stores at College and Claremont, just one mile north of this shopping center. Safeway's proposal for the Broadway & Pleasant Valley shopping center would relocate an expanded Safeway (65,000+ square feet) to the northeastern corner of the site, which currently houses an 87,220 square foot Longs. Here is a picture and diagram of Safeway's initial proposal for the site:



Aerial of Safeway proposal, courtesy of [Eric Fischer](#) (link to community mtg. photo set).



Courtesy of Safeway. [Click here](#) for a packet of diagrams and drawings (external link).

The design is, unfortunately, flawed. It basically perpetuates the current design, by maintaining long, squat buildings that surround the surface parking lot. It does add office space, and it fills in the perimeter of the site. But buildings remain set back from the street, offset by landscaping, and the prominence of the central parking lot is maintained; moreover, additional parking is added to the roof of the Safeway. In other words, the design remains wholly suburban. Pedestrian access to the shopping center is currently pretty miserable — sidewalks at the entry and exit points break off for the convenience of automobile navigation, or are omitted altogether. Based on these sketches, the new design does not completely address that problem either, except for including a few colored crosswalks.

Safeway's proposal is a misstep in an urban setting. Indeed, a quick glance at a [Google satellite image](#) makes it clear that the current suburban layout is an anomaly in North Oakland. So why should it be carried forward any longer? This site presents a special opportunity to fill a vast hole with a development pattern that is more fitting for a city. We would encourage Safeway to take the time to think this through carefully, rather than rush into unimaginative proposals like the one above. Here is our (more ambitious) concept for this site.

The first step is to completely eliminate the surface parking lot, and instead use the land to extend the street grid. Currently, Gilbert Street runs through the apartment block located just to the south of the site and turns into a driveway to the parking lot after it crosses Pleasant Valley. Under this proposal, Gilbert would continue north for two blocks, toward what is now the Longs building — not as a driveway, but as a true street with sidewalks. There would also be a new east-west street that would run the length of the site, starting at Broadway and

splitting the large site into small city blocks. As a nod to history, we named it McAdam Street, which was the name of the original street before Pleasant Valley Avenue was created to run from Broadway to Grand Avenue. Once the site is split into blocks, then we can apply the tried and true formula of ground-floor retail and several stories of upstairs housing, to fill in the new neighborhood:



Our alternative concept for the Broadway & Pleasant Valley site. Green = two height classes. Pink = pedestrian alley/plaza. Yellow = commercial storefront (does not represent a different height).



The above concept maintains one larger building, with an approximately 65,000 footprint, to accommodate the Safeway; here, too, we had in mind a ground-floor grocery and apartments above. An example, pictured at right, is the Whole Foods on 4th Street in San Francisco. That particular structure is bulkier than it needs to be, because the layers of parking were built above ground, between the store and the apartments; a better design would relocate (a reduced amount of) parking underground. But that is what the general feel of the Safeway would be; something that is a better fit for an urban environment. And in the case of the Broadway & Pleasant Valley shopping center, the northern back end of the site, at the bottom of the hill, is naturally dead space — so it seems like a good place to locate deliveries and parking entrances, in order to increase pedestrian safety on the interior streets.

The Broadway & Pleasant Valley intersection already has good access to transit; it is served by AC Transit lines 12, 51, 59/59A, and is less than one mile from Rockridge BART. The 7 bus line, which currently terminates at the BART station, could conceivably be extended south to serve the new development. These transit options should be emphasized at any new development on this site, with kiosks, maps, and clear signage installed in prominent locations that indicate the location of bus stops on Broadway, 51st Street, and Pleasant Valley, as well as the BART station. The adjacent bus stops should be upgraded to a more hospitable shelter design. Bicycle parking should also be placed throughout the site. The development would increase pedestrian and bicycle activity in the area, suggesting that some traffic calming at this wide intersection would also be in order.

The shopping center site was, until midway into the 20th century, the [Blake & Bilger Co. quarry](#), which was then later replaced by this shopping center. So the land is sunken and is already set apart from the surrounding neighborhood. This development concept takes advantage of that distance and feeling of separation (as well as the natural barriers on the northern and eastern boundaries of the site) to include buildings that are somewhat taller than what currently populates the surrounding blocks, in the hope that North Oakland neighbors won't mind extra height that does not directly shadow their backyards. Retail storefronts would face not just onto Broadway and Pleasant Valley, but also the interior streets. A pedestrian plaza and alley, both lined with storefronts, have also been included to provide a gathering place neighbors and visitors. The new retail would create a new commercial district anchoring the southern edge of

Rockridge, hopefully also increasing pedestrian traffic on Broadway and on the quieter south end of College Avenue.

Lastly, as for urban form: building heights would vary to increase visual interest, somewhere in the 45–85 feet range, extending and intensifying the character of the apartment block located just to the south of Pleasant Valley. The map shows one possibility: concentrating taller buildings toward the center of the site, with the addition of a taller building on the prominent northeast corner of Broadway and Pleasant Valley. Splitting the blocks into relatively fine parcels, and then building out a variety of design proposals, would also increase visual interest by giving the impression that the new blocks grew out organically. This will be especially important here because, as mentioned above, the site is already set off from the surrounding streets. The development must not resemble a gated or master-planned community. Instead, it should become a truly public place that draws people in, activating the surrounding streets and neighborhood.